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ABSTRACT

This series of special reports argues that states must use their newly established, more rigorous standards to (1) provide teachers with the skills and knowledge required to teach to the higher academic standards and (2) provide students with additional opportunities to learn and to achieve the higher standards. This report presents a number of intervention strategies that have proved effective in helping students increase their academic performance. The National Dropout Prevention Center has identified five levels of strategies for addressing the problems encountered in educating students in at-risk situations: systematic renewal, prevention, mediation, intervention, and recovery. This report explores mediation strategies, such as, parent and family involvement, multiple intelligences, service learning, and technology. Under intervention strategies it discusses alternative schooling, mentoring programs, and out-of-school experiences. (Contains 30 references.)

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Special Report

on

Standards, Assessment, Accountability, and Interventions

for the

Edna McConnell Clark Foundation

Report #3 Spring 2000

Providing A Helping Hand

by National Dropout Prevention Staff

Purpose of the Special Reports: *This series of special reports for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation argues that states must use their newly established, more rigorous standards to (1) provide teachers with the skills and knowledge required to teach to the higher standards and (2) provide students with additional opportunities to learn and to achieve the higher standards. Special Report #1 Putting the Cart Before the Horses provided a brief overview of establishing standards, assessing those standards, holding schools and students accountable for meeting the standards, teaching to the standards, and providing interventions to students who do not meet the standards. It argued that holding students accountable for passing assessments of standards is premature, that teachers should be trained to teach new standards-based curricula, and that interventions should be in place to help students who fail the assessments of the standards. Special Report #2 Part of the Blueprint for Standards-Based Reform Is Missing: Where Is the Foundation? focused on building school capacity, the importance of teacher characteristics in fostering student achievement, and providing effective professional development for teachers.*

The Dilemma

It is hard to argue against the need for raising academic standards in this country. It follows logically that if we set standards, we must assess students' knowledge to see how well they are mastering the standards. The question that arises at this point is what do we do about students who fail to meet the higher standards? Many policymakers and educators believe that accountability strategies (e.g., making promotion to the next grade or receiving a high school diploma contingent on passing the assessments) will motivate students to work harder. Others, however, question the advisability of placing additional barriers in the paths of students who may already be having difficulty traversing the educational system.

We know that everything in a student's life affects the student's ability to learn. Students in at-risk situations generally have personal, health, family, and/or community problems that contribute to their low academic performance. When these problems are compounded by circumstances in the school that hinder learning, the student often fails. Many students need a helping hand to overcome the problems that impede their learning. Without comprehensive system renewal,

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curriculum change, and the use of effective intervention strategies, many students will never have a chance to succeed. This Special Report #3 presents a number of intervention strategies that have proved effective in helping students increase their academic performance.

A Comprehensive Approach

For the most part, add-on or stand-alone efforts do not provide the continuing support needed by students who are at risk of failing in school. In addition, continuing to do more of the same old thing and then placing the blame on students who fail to learn is an abdication of our role as educators. For example, one result of standards-based reform and assessment is an increasing reliance on summer remedial programs to help low-performing students raise their academic achievement. Unfortunately, research reveals disappointing results for many summer programs. In Minneapolis, only 10% to 15% of the 1,900 fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-graders who attended summer sessions are on track to pass the Basic Standards Test required to get high school diplomas. Similar results were found by a three-year evaluation of Math Power, a three-week summer program for low-performing third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders in Montgomery County, MD. The study found that students' progress on math assessments showed little benefit from the program. The researchers suggested the reasons for this failure stemmed from the teachers' use of traditional directive, teacher-centered strategies rather than the inquiry-based activities that were supposed to form the basis of the program's curriculum (Pipho, 1999).

Thomas Payzant, Boston's superintendent of schools, has pointed out that schools need to look at the quality of what they do; they cannot continue using the same strategies as in the past. Summer school cannot be the same old summer school, and extra support during the school year cannot consist of those things that did not work the first time around (Pipho, 1999). In order to provide the helping hand that so many students need, schools must critically evaluate their curriculum and instructional strategies to ensure these are meeting the needs of low-performing students. The National Dropout Prevention Center has identified five levels of strategies for addressing the problems encountered in educating students in at-risk situations (Duttweiler, 1995):

1. ***Systemic renewal*** strategies are based on the theory that the educational system must change to create a flexible organization that enables teachers, school administrators, students, parents, and community members to collaborate in providing within each school the experiences students need to achieve success. For true school reform, there must be consistent, goal-directed policies; administrative support for change; ongoing, quality professional development; and adequate resources for schools to implement practices that ensure success for all students.
2. ***Prevention*** strategies include actions taken that anticipate, forestall, or deal with cognitive, social, or personal problems before they impair a student's ability to perform successfully in school. Prevention strategies are designed to "level the playing field"—to help students in at-risk situations enter school ready to learn, to provide the skills necessary for school success, to assist parents in becoming involved in their children's education, to ensure physical and mental health, and to remove barriers to success within the early grades.
3. ***Mediation*** strategies ensure that all students acquire—the first time around—the skills they need to function effectively both in school and in the world outside of school. In other words, *mediation* ensures that *remediation* will not be necessary. Mediation strategies are those that provide an active, learner-centered environment in the school and focus on teachers as facilitators of learning.
4. ***Intervention*** strategies are designed to interrupt or modify academic, school, or personal problems that are negatively affecting students' performances. Intervention strategies are those that address the continuing needs of students who remain at risk in middle and high school.

5. ***Recovery*** contains those strategies designed to entice students back into a learning environment where they can complete the requirements for a high school diploma or a GED.

It seems obvious that attempts to improve middle school students' learning will be successful only to the extent that changes throughout the educational system give school building staff the support and resources they need and sufficient latitude to adapt policies and practices to fit their unique circumstances. Likewise, most educators agree that prevention of academic problems is the ideal target, and the earlier problems are identified and dealt with the greater the likelihood a student will experience academic success. However, because the focus of this report is on the middle-grade years, it will concentrate its attention on only two of the five levels mentioned above: mediation and intervention strategies. The following sections contain some of the strategies identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) as effective when used as part of a comprehensive effort in promoting learning in middle-grade students who are in at-risk situations. The NDPC web site has additional information on programs. You can access the site at <www.dropoutprevention.org>.

Mediation Strategies

If schools are going to provide a helping hand for low-performing middle-grade students to meet higher standards, they will need to adopt strategies that focus on parent and family involvement with the educational program and that engage students in a variety of active learning experiences. Research consistently finds that parent involvement has a direct, positive effect on children's achievement (Williams & Saavedra, 1993). Research also indicates that students, especially those from at-risk environments, flourish with instructional strategies that engage them in learning. Teachers, as facilitators of learning, teach to the multiple intellectual strengths of students, integrate service learning into the curriculum, and use technology to provide active learning environments and experiences that are relevant to life outside the classroom (Duttweiler, 1995).

Parent and Family Involvement

Many parents successfully prepare their children for school and are involved with the educational process. There are many others, however, who want their children to learn, but who are not involved in their child's education. Job and family demands may leave little free time for some. Many ethnic and racial minority parents, low-income parents, parents for whom English is a second language, parents with a low level of education, or parents who had negative experiences during their school years often do not feel comfortable in the schools (Moles, 1999).

Schools and school systems that successfully involve parents are responding to the qualities, characteristics, and needs of the parents in order to overcome the barriers which interfere with communication and participation. These barriers include parents' level of literacy; language preferred for reading, listening, speaking, and writing; daily commitments and responsibilities that may affect the time, energy, and attention available to devote to school; and parents' level of comfort in becoming involved in their children's education.

Examples of Effective Parent and Family Involvement Programs

One highly acclaimed program—Families and Schools Together (FAST)—builds protective factors for children and increases parent involvement with the family, other parents, the school, and the community. This program, developed in 1987 by Lynn McDonald of Family Service (a nonprofit family counseling agency in Madison, WI), has been especially successful in involving low-income, stressed, and isolated parents. The overall goal of the FAST program is to intervene early to help youth in at-risk situations succeed at school, at home, and in the community. FAST offers youth structured opportunities for involvement in repeated, relationship-building interactions with their

primary caretakers, other family members, other families, peers, school staff, and community representatives (McDonald & Frey, 1999).

The FAST process begins with home visits, followed by eight to ten weeks of school-based evening activities for 12 families. After the initial set of weekly meetings, there are monthly multifamily FASTWORKS meetings for two years. These meetings are run by paid FAST parent graduates (supported by FAST team members) to consolidate and maintain the interpersonal relationships developed during the weekly sessions. Six research-based strategies are used to build protective factors for the youth in the program. The strategies include the following (McDonald & Frey, 1999):

Increasing the Child's Interpersonal Bonds—Each child receives 15 minutes a day of one-to-one quality play or discussion time with his or her parent. Parents practice this process during the weekly meetings and then are requested to play with their children at home on a daily basis.

Strengthening the Family System—The family unit is systematically strengthened with hour-long weekly sessions at their FAST family table. During this activity, parents are helped to be both firmly in charge of and lovingly connected to their children.

Parent-to-Parent Support—Spouses, partners, or two single caretakers are paired and spend 15 minutes at each weekly session listening to each other speak about issues or concerns.

Parent Self-Help Support Group—Parents in FAST meet for 45 minutes during each weekly session to help each other assist their children to succeed in school and at home.

Parent Empowerment Training—FAST activities are structured to systematically empower parents in the relationships they have with others in the family, school, and community by providing frequent role playing of behaviors and experiences of success.

Building School and Community Affiliation—Positive, repeated, personal, low-key interactions with school personnel outside the regular school day build relationships that are not based on the child's problem behavior at school. Over time, this results in an increase in the appropriate use of school opportunities and services by parents.

Evaluations have shown that FAST has a statistically significant positive effect on children and families. Of the thousands of families who have attended one multifamily FAST meeting, more than 80% have graduated from the 8- to 10-week program. Two to four years after participating in FAST, 75% of the parents who graduated were still very involved with schools and 86% were still seeing friends they made at FAST. Two statewide FAST evaluations (Wisconsin and California) found reductions in student behavior problems such as bullying, hitting, stealing, and lying; and in attention-span problems such as lack of focus and distraction in school (McDonald & Frey, 1999).

The ASPIRA Association, founded in 1961, now helps over 250,000 Puerto Rican and other Latino youth and their families. The ASPIRA Parents for Educational Excellence (APEX, 1999) program reaches out to these parents, helping them become involved in their children's education. Its main goal is to increase the numbers and effectiveness of Latino parents by helping them become involved in supporting, monitoring, and advocating for their children's education. This organization strives to "forge new relationships between Latino families, their communities, and local educators" through supporting, monitoring, and advocating for their children's education. The program model is currently in five sites: Chicago, IL; Philadelphia, PA; New York, NY; Newark, NJ; and Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico.

The APEX model (APEX, 1999) uses two basic components toward the goal of replicating and disseminating its program. The first is a formal training program of ten workshops that address such subjects as helping children improve their study habits, parents'

rights in the schools, and understanding school structure. The second component provides one-on-one assistance to parents who train other parents using a train-the-trainer model. ASPIRA seeks to cultivate the potential leadership capacity of youth by working directly with students, their parents, and community leaders.

The Valdosta (GA) City School System is having success involving parents in the Parents Assuring Student Success (PASS) program. The program focuses on helping parents make sure their children can read, write, and solve problems. Using a manual published by the National Educational Service, Bloomington, IN (Ban, 1993), the program elicits parent participation and involvement in their children's learning process. The first part of the manual covers study skills and well-known learning strategies. The second part helps parents to acquire skills in teaching and reinforcing critical student study habits at home. The Valdosta system piloted the program in 1998 with 75 parents and has continued the program in subsequent years because of its success.

Multiple Intelligences

Traditional instructional strategies and curriculum materials tend to motivate and reward those students who show strengths in verbal and mathematical applications. Students weak in these two areas are often identified as slow learners. However, when concepts are presented in different formats, these learners are often just as capable as the traditionally successful student. When educators recognize and use different ways of teaching, they help students find different ways to learn (Armstrong, 1994).

The *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* evolved from Project Zero, a project at Harvard University started in 1979 by Dr. Howard Gardner to investigate human potential (Gardner, 1983). Gardner defines an intelligence as "the ability to solve problems or to create products that are valued in one or more cultural settings." He has identified eight intelligences, all of which are present in all human beings, but may be at different levels of development. The eight intelligences are:

Verbal/Linguistic—The ability to use both oral and written language fluently to communicate effectively.

Logical/Mathematical—The ability to use abstract thought, precision, deductive/inductive reasoning, counting, organization, and logical structure to solve abstract problems and complex relationships found in mathematics and in the scientific process.

Musical—Evidence of sensitivity to pitch, rhythm, timbre, tone, color, and emotional power of music and the sounds in one's environment; the ability to perceive, discriminate, and express all aspects of music and environmental sounds.

Visual/Spatial—The capacity to perceive the world in mental images (i.e., to see form, color, shape, and texture in the mind's eye).

Bodily/Kinesthetic—The ability to use the whole body to express ideas and feelings, to produce or transform things, and/or to perform coordinated actions with balance, dexterity, strength, flexibility, and speed.

Interpersonal—The ability to perceive and discriminate the moods, feelings, intentions, and motivations of other people and the ability to interpret those behaviors with appropriate responses.

Intrapersonal—The ability to know oneself and to act adaptively to accurately assess personal strengths/weaknesses, perceive inner moods, motivations, temperaments, and desires.

Naturalist—The ability to recognize and classify plants, animals, and natural objects by their differences, patterns, configurations, etc.

Examples of Effective Multiple Intelligences Programs

In 1994, New Canaan Public Schools in Connecticut developed a Summer Stars Program designed around Dr. Gardner's *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (Cantrell, Ebdon, Firlik, Johnson, & Rearick, 1997). This week-long camp is designed for children ages 7-12 to tap into their unique strengths.

Campers choose materials and activities from many different topics and participate in one of three internships: the Challenger Mission at the Bridgeport Discovery Museum, the Sea Voyage at the Norwalk Maritime Center, or simulated flight training at the Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation in Stratford. Camp projects have included producing a handcrafted bound book, writing musical compositions, constructing rockets, building block structures from students' blueprints, writing and illustrating a camp newsletter, reinventing stories to tell at camp ceremonies, producing and acting in plays, designing T-shirts, and preparing astronaut food.

Camp leaders developed a pre- and post-camp survey for campers and their parents. Analysis of the surveys revealed that the camp's application of the *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* positively affected children's understanding of their perceived "smarts," promoted risk-taking, and closed the gap between parents' and students' understanding of the theory. Findings also showed that in 75% of the cases, both parents and children agreed on the child's best- and least-developed modes of intelligences. During the first three years of camp, 99% of the campers were very satisfied with their course selections. Camp teachers learned that by allowing children to make their own educational choices, they were more highly motivated, satisfied, fulfilled, successful, and tended to choose courses that were directly related to their stronger intelligence (Cantrell et al., 1997).

The Think Tank is a combination discovery room and lab found at Kent Gardens Elementary School in McClean, VA (Knodt, 1997). All K-6 students flock to this room for up to an hour every other week. The Think Tank focuses on multiple intelligences and critical and creative thinking as a foundation for learning. Activities in the Think Tank don't occur in a vacuum; everything is fully integrated with all other coursework to help students make connections and link learning in the lab to their school curriculum and home and community experiences. All projects are designed and selected that recognize and nurture all of the varied human intelligences and all of the combinations of intelligences. Some projects use students' strengths; others encourage children to explore areas where they are weaker and may feel less comfortable. In other words, projects are designed so that intelligences are layered in creative ways. For example, students learn to make drawings (visual-spatial) by first mastering the concept of a bird's-eye view (mathematical-logical). As they create dream-home plans, they are encouraged to label each room (verbal-linguistic). Then they brainstorm together and combine their efforts (interpersonal) before building a three-dimensional model (bodily-kinesthetic) (Knodt, 1997).

Another example of using the *Theory of Multiple Intelligences* in instruction is provided by the Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction (ECRI) (Fashola, 1998). The goal of ECRI is to improve elementary school students' reading ability. ECRI teachers expect all students to excel. The ECRI lessons are scripted and incorporate multisensory and sequential methods and strategies of teaching. In a typical lesson, teachers introduce new concepts using at least seven methods of instruction, teaching at least one comprehension skill, one study skill, and one grammar or creative writing skill.

In an evaluation of ECRI during the regular school day, researchers investigated the effects of ECRI on students in grades two through seven in Morgan County, Tennessee, and compared them to students in a control group who were using a commercial reading program. Both schools were tested using the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) reading and comprehension vocabulary subtests. ECRI students outperformed those in the control group, with effect sizes ranging from +.48 to +.90 in reading comprehension, and from +.31 to 1.40 in vocabulary. Another evaluation of the effectiveness of ECRI with Latino bilingual students in Oceanside, CA, Killeen, TX, and Calexico, CA, showed normal curve equivalent gains that ranged from +6.4 to +25.7. At the end of the school year, students in both groups were tested using standardized tests, and results showed that students who had been involved in ECRI made significantly greater gains on the standardized tests than did students in the control groups. ECRI is used in hundreds of schools nationwide (Fashola, 1998).

Service Learning

Service learning is a teaching and learning method that connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning, personal growth, and civic responsibility. The Learn and Serve America Program, funded by the Corporation for National Service, defines service learning as a method by which participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences with the following characteristics:

- opportunities for students to use newly acquired academic skills and knowledge in real life situations in their own communities;
- enhancement of what is taught in the school by extending student learning beyond the classroom;
- collaboration between school and community;
- structured time for students to think, talk, and write about what they did and saw during the service activity; and
- development of a sense of caring for others.

Examples of Effective Service Learning Programs

Service Learning has had an impact on the school system and community around Britton's Neck, SC. Last year, a group of students from Britton's Neck High School conducted a needs assessment and discovered a need for a local rural fire department. Teachers throughout the K-12 system integrated a safety curriculum into core academic courses. After securing property from a community member, the students built a fire department as a service project. As a result, the property around the fire department has been re-classified and the cost of homeowner's insurance has gone down for all the homeowners in the surrounding area. However, according to Marion 4 Superintendent Milt Marley, "the real impact is the manner in which service learning has reconnected our youth to the community and has actively engaged our young people in the learning process" (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, 1999).

The Alabama African-American Historic Project (AAAHP, Huntsville City Schools) is a continuation of the original project funded in 1994. The purposes of this project are to research the history and culture of Alabama's African-Americans and to document their contributions to the development of Huntsville, AL, from 1800 to 1900. This year the project design again is interdisciplinary and organized into three central components: field study, photographic history and documentary, and interdisciplinary instructional multimedia kits and lesson plans. The social studies curriculum for third-grade students in Huntsville covers the city's history. AAAHP participants will create a historic coloring book documenting contributions by African-Americans in Huntsville during the 1800s to give to the city's 3,000 third-grade students. Anticipated student-developed products over the next two years also include instructional multimedia kits and lesson plans to be checked out and used similar to the Hands-On Science Project kits. Students working on a photographic history and documentary will publish a pictorial history of 19th Century African-Americans and will develop an educational documentary. The Alabama African-American Historic Project received the state's 1997 Distinguished Service Award and continues to receive state and national recognition (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, 1999).

Technology

Technology, in particular computer-based technology, offers some of the best opportunities for developing instruction that engages students in authentic learning, addresses multiple intelligences, and adapts to students' learning styles. Technology provides students with the means for taking responsibility for their own learning when used as a tool for accessing information, research, and problem solving. It allows students to learn without publicly being labeled slow or stupid and can enrich and accelerate the pace of learning for students who are behind.

With existing computers and telecommunications equipment, a student can search vast

databases, collect data, and share on-line with students at other sites. When students have the capacity to go on-line, there's no reason for using out-of-date or inaccurate information in research projects. Advances in digitization have made it possible to transfer data at lightning speed and to combine text, sound, and video images to create multimedia environments. A pupil doing a research project on a planned landfill site can create a multimedia report using real science and real economics.

Examples of Effective Technology Programs

Telecommunications allow cooperative learning at a distance where students are able to team up with students at other schools or in other countries to work on joint projects. In the National Geographic Society's "Kids Network," for example, students at different schools collect scientific data on problems such as acid rain and share observations about the patterns that emerge. During the Persian Gulf War, students in one New York high school understood the reality of war better when they traded e-mail messages with students in Israel who reported on Scud missile attacks (ASCD, 1993).

East Rock Magnet School in New Haven, CT, has integrated technology into its curriculum (White, 1999). East Rock Magnet School, with the aid of Prodigy and the local phone company, successfully networked the entire school. During the past three years, the school has created amazing programs for learning curriculum through technology. For example, the Brazil Project, part of the Global Learn Program, is a program where students learn and follow a group of real explorers throughout Brazil to learn about history, culture, and ecology. The integration of technology has created excitement among teachers who are learning to embellish their own lessons in the classroom. Future plans include implementing video conferencing software so students can hold conversations in the school and around the globe.

Designed for the middle school student, Preserving the Past is offered by Silver Sands Middle School, Port Orange, FL, along with the Museum of Arts and Sciences, Daytona Beach, FL ("Success Stories," 1999). The program has a twofold purpose: to teach Florida history through technology and archeology and to offer students experiences with real skills required for the fields of technology, archeology, education, and graphic and visual arts. Seventh-grade students create a mock archeological site and develop electronic journals in the field with portable computers. They create a database, reconstruct finds in a technological research lab, and present their finds in the context of Florida's history through multimedia presentations, an archeological symposium, and development of a museum quality exhibition. Preserving the Past second-year students partner with first-year students to teach multimedia and archeological skills. As a result of the interest generated about this project, the Museum will also be working with two elementary schools to create school-based virtual galleries. One student said, "I learned how to use tools for excavation. I learned how to use computers to make QTVR and digital images. This was a new experience for me. I didn't know anything about this kind of technology, and now I do."

Georgia's Sandy Creek High School offers students a technology-rich environment. The school begins the day with announcements broadcast live on color television to each classroom. Students study anatomy by performing dissections on a cadaver using a computer simulation and turn geometry equations into moving, three-dimensional images. Using computers, students access newspapers and other material and write and edit research papers using spell-check software to correct errors. With computers minimizing the labor of researching and writing, students spend more time exploring ideas and applying concepts ("GA's Sandy Creek High," 1994).

Technology plays an important role in the Gifford Street High School alternative education program in Elgin, IL. The alternative program includes an alternative high school, an afternoon and summer

school computer-assisted program for middle and high school students, an evening school, and alternative to suspension and expulsion programs for both middle and high school students. All of the programs rely heavily on individualized computer study. The PLATO computer-assisted learning package is the system's coordinating link (Hunnicutt, Miskovic, Bradford, & Tucker, 1999).

The Vincennes, IN, Community School Alternative Education Program (VCSAEP) has used a combination of high-tech courseware from NovaNET and caring instruction to turn their students around. Double-digit gains in a variety of subject areas have energized middle and high school students with a history of chronic failure. Using the NovaNET curricula, middle school students' and special needs students' scores jumped 16% in vocabulary, 11% in reading, and 29% in number operations between August 1997 and February 1998.

VCSAEP's instructional goals for learners include the following:

- receiving credit toward graduation,
- improving classroom skills and behavior,
- regaining control of their academic standing in order to successfully re-enter the traditional school setting,
- increasing classroom attendance, and
- working toward GED certificates.

Subjects taught at the alternative school were coordinated with the middle and high school curriculua and aligned smoothly with 10,000-plus hours of courseware available on-line from NovaNET. NovaNET gives each student an intital assessment test to determine ability level and proper placement. Then each pupil is assigned individualized, computer-based lessons in various curricular areas to match particular strengths and weaknesses. Upon completion of each curriculum module, learning progress and mastery are evaluated. (For additional information call NovaNET at 800-937-6682 or visit their web site at <www.novanet.com>).

Intervention Strategies

Intervention strategies are designed to provide students who are having difficulty in the classroom, whether academically or behaviorally, with the additional assistance they need to learn successfully. Although these strategies might also be considered appropriate mediation strategies, they are especially effective when used to intervene in situations where students are having particular difficulties. For example, alternative schools provide settings in which students who do not do well in the regular classroom receive help appropriate to their needs. Mentoring has proven to be an effective strategy with a variety of youth but has been extremely effective with youth in at-risk situations. And, more school districts are implementing after-school, weekend, and summer programs to provide children, those in at-risk situations as well as others, a more structured, enriching alternative to unsupervised and sometimes dangerous out-of-school hours.

Alternative Schooling

Within the last decade there has been a resurgence of alternative schools addressing the needs of students in at-risk situations. Many of these new schools have been designed to provide an alternative to dropping out of school, with special attention to the student's individual social needs and the academic requirements for a high school diploma. Many districts are now beginning to offer alternative school programs at the middle school level, designed specifically to help students develop the behavioral and academic foundation they need to stay in school and graduate.

The most common form of alternative school operating today is designed to be part of a school district's comprehensive dropout prevention program at the middle or high school level. Students attending these schools typically are underachieving and usually are deficient in credits required to graduate or are older than other students in their grade. In many communities, alternative schools offer a unique parenting program

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with special opportunities for teenage mothers unable to attend the traditional high school but who want to graduate from high school.

The following profile describes characteristics common to schools that are most successful with students who do not prosper in traditional schools (Smink, 1997):

1. a maximum teacher/student ratio of 1:10;
2. a small student base not exceeding 250 students;
3. a clearly stated mission and discipline code;
4. a caring faculty with continual staff development;
5. a school staff having high expectations for student achievement;
6. a learning program specific to the student's expectations and learning style;
7. a flexible school schedule with community involvement and support; and
8. a total commitment to have each student be a success.

Examples of Effective Alternative Programs

The Hostos school is a small alternative high school, one of 75 run by New York City Board of Education serving students who did not succeed in their previous school. The basic approach is based on strong interventions including attendance at summer school and small daily family groups used to discuss all school or social issues faced by the students. Despite the fact that Hostos has 20% more students living below the poverty level than the New York City average, it had over 20% more students passing the Regents exams than the city average. Furthermore, the school dropout rate was 0.3% compared to the city-wide average of 5%.

Results for Jefferson County High School in Louisville, KY, in the past decade have been equally impressive. The high school is an open entry school that provides three blocks of time each day in four different city locations. This flexibility of time and location makes it very convenient for students to attend the school. A diagnostic assessment package allows each student to proceed through their own individualized program at their own pace using a computer-based curriculum with supplemented materials developed by the school staff. Since the program began in 1986, it has graduated an average of 450 students per year—a total of more than 5,000 students—with a completion rate of 72% of the students that enter the program.

The Enid, OK, Lincoln Alternative Academy is recognized as one of the best alternative programs in the country. In 1998, the Academy received a Crystal Star Award of Excellence from the National Dropout Prevention Network. The school is designed to meet the needs of potential dropouts and students in at-risk situations from 6th through 12th grades. The Academy serves students involved with the juvenile justice system, pregnant and teenaged parents, students with behavioral problems who are not functioning successfully in the regular classroom, and students with drug/alcohol related problems. The program is open entry and requirements are hour- and/or competency-based. Coursework is individually designed to meet the specific requirements and needs of each student, and many courses are competency based and self-paced. All credits received are recorded at the student's home school (Hillman & Rogers, 1999).

The teachers at Lincoln Alternative Academy are dedicated to working with at-risk youth. With a low teacher/student ratio, teachers are encouraged to think outside the box of traditional school settings and to use innovative instructional strategies. On-campus counseling includes crisis, individual, and family therapy; alcohol and drug intervention; and small support groups. Student responsibility and choice are emphasized in the disciplinary procedures. Group activities are designed to improve social skills and to augment the family atmosphere of the program. In addition, students are involved in community service projects. The school's effectiveness is measured by students' attendance rates, number of behavioral referrals, grade-point averages, and standardized test scores. For more information on alternative schools in Oklahoma, check out the Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center web site (www.csdcotac.org).

ASPEN High School (Robin, IL) offers a resource to students who have not been successful in the traditional high school setting. The school's smaller class size, shorter school day and week, child-care center, and counseling services provide the means to turn lives around. At its inception in 1993, staff and students selected a name for the school: Acknowledging Student's Personal Educational Needs—ASPEN. Classes are held only in the morning four days a week. Students have the option of attending on Fridays to make up absences, complete work, gain extra credit, or take field trips. The Infant Care Center, which meets or exceeds all standards set by the state of Illinois for day care agencies, provides day care services for teen parents; improves parenting behavior through 45-minute child/parent interaction periods each day; and networks with social service and health agencies for other services (Freeman, Murphy, & Fowler, 1999).

Mentoring Programs

Mentoring is a caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and mentee that is based on trust. The mentors are trusted friends committed to providing guidance and support for the mentees to develop their fullest potential. Mentoring occurs in many different formats including the traditional one-to-one relationship, a one-to-group relationship, and, more recently, a telementoring relationship. Mentoring programs across the country have been developed with different goals and objectives. Most programs, however, have been designed to produce benefits in the following areas: academic achievement, employment or career preparation, social or behavior modification, family and parenting skills, and social responsibilities (Smink, 1999).

Mentoring serves as a powerful low-cost, low-tech strategy to help youth in at-risk situations. Mentors have the influence to change the negative cycles of their mentees' lives and keep students in school. A thorough review of Big Brother/Big Sister programs (Tierney & Grossman, 1995) and the Commonwealth Fund's survey (McLean, Colsanto, & Schoen, 1998) revealed significant decreases in initiating drug and alcohol use, violence against others, and skipped classes. A significant number of students also got into less trouble in and out of school. The studies also found that mentored students improved their self-esteem, their grades, and family relationships.

Examples of Effective Mentoring Programs

Help One Student Succeed (HOSTS) is a model that helps schools create tutoring programs for at-risk students using a mentoring approach. HOSTS schools provide one-to-one in-school and after-school tutorial services to Title I students in elementary through high school who are performing below the 30th percentile. This includes limited English proficient students and those who have been retained or are in special education classes. HOSTS trains volunteers from businesses and the community, as well as peers and cross-age mentors to serve as tutors. Since its inception in Vancouver, Washington, in 1972, HOSTS has involved over 150,000 students and 100,000 mentors in more than 4,000 programs nationwide, many of which are after school programs (Fashola, 1998).

The Kalamazoo Area Academic Achievement Program (KAAAP) in Kalamazoo, MI, began in 1992 in five school districts with full collaboration with the Kalamazoo County Chamber of Commerce ("KAAAP Korner," 1999). The program matches business and community mentors with about 75 students in the fourth grade. Students complete a comprehensive program of mentoring, family involvement, and work experiences, and upon graduation from high school they earn a $4,000 grant for postsecondary education. Since the program started, KAAAP has served more than 900 academically at-risk students and their families. Fully sponsored by the Chamber' businesses and the school districts, KAAAP expects to have its first graduates in the year 2000. The W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research is conducting a multiyear study of the first 300 students. The initial research results found improvements in the KAAAP students' attendance and test scores compared to their counter parts in the control group.

The DeKalb County School District (GA) has implemented a districtwide middle school mentoring program that seeks to improve student achievement through personal outreach. Hundreds of employees for businesses and agencies mentor DeKalb students on a one-to-one basis during the regular school day. Principals play a critical role in motivating staff, mobilizing school resources, and creating a school environment that meets the multiple needs of students. Mentors meet with students during the regular school day. Training and regular feedback from mentors enables professional support in assessing student progress. Teacher/student mentoring matches staff members with children. Although a districtwide coordinator supervises the program, some schools have an on-site coordinator. Program evaluation reveals that 66% of the mentored students improved their grade point average, 61% improved their attendance, 77% had fewer discipline referrals, and mentored students reported feeling that someone cared about them ("Dropping In," 1999).

The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program is a cross-age tutoring program designed to increase the self-esteem and school success of at-risk middle and high school students by placing them in positions of responsibility as tutors of younger elementary school students. When students agree to serve as tutors, they are required to enroll in a special tutoring class where they are paid a minimum wage stipend and work with three elementary students at a time for a total of about four hours per week. The overall goal of the program is to reduce the dropout rate of at-risk students by improving their self-concepts and academic skills. The program also emphasizes elimination of nonacademic and disciplinary factors that contribute to dropping out. For example, it attempts to develop students' sense of self-control, decrease student truancy, and reduce disciplinary referrals. It also seeks to form home-school partnerships to increase the level of support available to students. The main evaluation of the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program compared 63 CVYP tutors to 70 students. Two years after the program began, 12% of the comparison students but only 1% of the CVYP students had dropped out. Reading grades were significantly higher for the CVYP group, as were scores on a self-esteem measure and on a measure of attitude towards school (Fashola, 1998).

The U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs (OJJDP) administers JUMP (Juvenile Mentoring Program). JUMP funds programs across the country that bring together caring, responsible adults and at-risk young people in a one-on-one mentoring relationship. The program is designed to reduce juvenile delinquency and gang participation, improve academic performance, and reduce school dropout rates. OJJDP's experience with JUMP suggests that strengthening the role of mentoring as a component of youth programming may pay dividends in improved school performance and reduced antisocial behavior, including alcohol and other drug use (Grossman & Garry, 1997).

Out-of-School Experiences

For students in at-risk situations, programs offered by schools or community groups often provide the only quality academic support, recreation, or cultural enrichment the children experience during the time they are out of school. For children who face academic or behavioral obstacles to success during the school hours, out-of-school programs appear to offer a means for eliminating those obstacles and improving the education of the whole child. Although the research on out-of-school experiences is limited, there is reason to believe that such experiences have a positive effect on the academic success, social behavior, and opportunities for enrichment of students in at-risk situations (Fashola, 1998).

As Nancy Carter, project director for the Denver Public Schools' 21st Century Community Learning Centers' middle school initiative, pointed out, middle school is the time to focus out-of-school attention. "This is the time parents assume kids can be on their own. In elementary school kids are in a protective safety net. They are not as much into the herd instinct. But in junior high there is more freedom, and there are lots of choices. Juvenile crime goes up at that age" (Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 1999).

A number of studies have found that children who attend quality programs have better peer relations, emotional adjustment, grades, and conduct in school compared to peers who are not in such programs. Quality programs also provided students with more learning opportunities, and academic or enrichment activities. Children who were under adult supervision, whether in programs or at home, had better social skills and higher self-esteem than their peers who were unsupervised after school. In addition, students who attended after-school programs regularly had higher grades and self-esteem compared to peers with lower attendance rates (Baker & Witt, 1996). Teachers and principals have reported that students who participate in after-school programs become more cooperative, learn to better handle conflicts, develop an interest in recreational reading, and receive better grades (Riley, Steinberg, Todd, Junge, & McClain, 1994).

Recognizing the need for expanding such worthwhile out-of-school experiences for students, the U.S. Department of Education has initiated the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program to support school/community partnerships to keep schools open after regular school hours as safe havens for enhanced learning.

Examples of Effective Out-of-School Programs

The following sections describe some of the most widely used after-school and extended-day programs identified by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR) at Johns Hopkins University (Fashola, 1998).

The Junior Great Book Curriculum of Interpretive Reading, Writing, and Discussion (JGBC) is a junior version of the Great Books Foundation program. It strives to promote cognitive processing in reading comprehension and literacy in children in grades 2-12 by emphasizing three kinds of thinking: factual, interpretive, and evaluative. These three types of information about text are explored by children using a method of shared inquiry and interpretive questioning, which encourages children to realize that there is more than one answer to questions asked about the text they have read. When schools choose to engage in the JGBC program, the school is provided with a two-day, ten-hour, "Basic Leader" training course. Schools can also choose to enroll in optional one- or two-day curriculum leader training courses. Students who participate in the program are usually enrolled for one semester, in which they study an anthology consisting of twelve selections.

In an evaluation of JGBC that researched the effects of the program on academic achievement in reading vocabulary during the school day, 150 JGBC students were matched with 120 control students in four schools. In the four schools, JGBC students outscored their control group counterparts. An additional internal evaluation of the program showed that students involved in JGBC demonstrated stronger, interpretive thinking skills than did the students in the control group.

Voyager Expanded Learning is an extended school day (before- and after-school, summer, and intersession) program. It has a variety of academically enriching themes designed to help students in grades K-8 become active learners in mathematics, reading, science, arts, and social studies. The goal of these units is to make learning interactive and meaningful by providing a "thematic, multidisciplinary approach to instruction" that will allow students to learn "theories, facts, and concepts, while at the same time requiring them to learn higher order thinking skills by solving real-life problems." The units are divided into daily activities, with active learning projects and outcome objectives for the teachers and the students. The development of the curriculum is research based, and the lessons for each theme are aligned with state and national standards.

A publication for the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation (1999), *Making After School Count: Expanded-Day Classes at School Can Increase Academic Achievement*, spotlights promising out-of-school programs for middle school students. The Urban Family Institute (UFI) Kids Integrated Development Systems (K.I.D.S) kits are designed for schools and community organizations trying to serve children

during out-of-school time. The Institute began compiling the kits in 1998 in response to a national need for expanded after-school opportunities and a corresponding need for supplemental academic experiences for children, especially in low-income neighborhoods. The kits are a collection of creative curriculum compiled by the UFI from more than 20 national organizations. The Smithsonian Institution, Children's Rainforest, Scholastic, 4-H Clubs, Reading Rainbow, and National Geographic are among the kit contributors.

K.I.D.S kits provide a year's worth of activities that can be taught by parents, volunteers, or teachers. The activities are tied to national academic standards and are modified to be age-appropriate for children from 3 to 15 years old. Lessons from the kits use a themed multidisciplinary approach to help children view themselves first as part of a small group and then as part of larger groups, such as their community, nation, and world.

Energy Express, a six-week summer program in West Virginia, offers more than 3,000 rural children a combination of reading and nutritional snacks. The program, created in 1994, operates at 76 sites in 38 counties. Groups of eight children interact with college student mentors, most of who attend West Virginia's universities and are sponsored by AmeriCorps. Energy Express is held in schools with at least 50% of the students receiving free or reduced lunches. State and national partners are joined by local partners in support of the program. Local partners include civic organizations, boards of education, churches, extension organizations, Foster Grandparents, libraries, and parent organizations. The reading level for children who participated in Energy Express during the summer in 1998 was maintained or increased. On average, children gained one month in comprehension and two months in overall reading, according to a rigorous evaluation.

The Denver Public Schools 21st Century Community Learning Centers' middle school initiative includes three sites: Skinner, Lake, and Horace Mann middle schools. Project Director Nancy Carter said the kids love Skinner Middle School's Saturday School. "From 8 to noon every other Saturday, they have three periods of academics and two periods of recreation. It is academic remediation presented as an opportunity, not as a punishment. We've already seen a 10% increase in regular attendance at the middle school, because kids who miss school are not allowed to come on Saturday." There has been a 95% completion rate and, although some of its participants have been referred by the court system, many of them stay on long after their mandated time. Lake and Horace Mann middle schools offer after-school programs that are based on literacy improvement. "At Lake, kids had to write, script, design, and put on a puppet show for elementary school kids. The focus is reading and writing," Carter said. "At Horace Mann, we did a low-rider club. Kids built low-rider model cars with velvet seats. There was a lot of reading comprehension needed for them to understand and use the directions to build the models."

Conclusion

Students in at-risk situations are faced with personal, health, family, and/or community problems that contribute to their low academic performance. Too often, these problems are compounded by circumstances in the schools that hinder student learning. This report has identified only a few of the strategies and programs available to help students achieve academic success. Successful attempts to improve middle-grade students' learning will require changes throughout the educational system. Comprehensive system changes should be made to give schools the support and resources they need and sufficient latitude to adapt policies and practices to fit their unique circumstances. Curriculum and instructional changes should be made to provide students with active learning opportunities focused on their learning needs.

To provide a helping hand for low-performing middle-grade students, schools will need to adopt strategies that focus on parent and family involvement and engage students in a variety of active learning

experiences—experiences that address students' multiple intellectual strengths, integrate service learning into the curriculum, and use technology to provide active learning environments and experiences that are relevant to life outside the classroom.

Intervention strategies must be put in place to provide middle-grade students who are having difficulty in the classroom with the additional assistance they need to learn successfully. Alternative schools provide settings in which students who do not do well in the regular classroom receive help appropriate to their needs. Mentoring has proven to be extremely effective with youth in at-risk situations. In addition, more school districts are implementing after-school, weekend, and summer programs to provide children structured, enriching alternatives during out-of-school hours.

The best course of action is to develop a comprehensive program that revitalizes the schools, includes ongoing teacher professional development (see Special Report #2), and provides students with a wide variety of mediation and intervention strategies designed to give them the helping hand they need. The crucial point—the absolutely essential factor from the perspective of National Dropout Prevention Center staff—is that we cannot set higher standards and hold students accountable and still continue along the same, familiar classroom path. We cannot continue business as usual in our schools unless we want to push students out the door. Higher standards and higher expectations can lead to higher academic achievement for all students if we also provide the kind of classroom instruction, the technology, and the interventions middle-grade students in at-risk situations need to succeed. We must provide a helping hand.

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Middle School Standards, Assessment, Accountability, and Interventions

This study of middle school standards, assessment, accountability, and interventions is funded by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation

Goal of the Study

The goal of this study is to analyze the implementation of state and district mandated academic standards, assessment processes, accountability, and intervention strategies at the middle-school level in order to identify and describe those intervention strategies that are effective in increasing the ability of middle school students in at-risk situations to achieve state or district academic standards.

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The National Dropout Prevention Center and Network

The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC)—a research center within the College of Health, Education, and Human Development at Clemson University, Clemson, SC—was created to significantly reduce America's dropout rate. It is committed to meeting the needs of youth in at-risk situations by shaping school environments which ensure that all youth receive the quality education to which they are entitled. The NDPC acts in concert with the National Dropout Prevention Network (NDPN)—a membership organization of more than 2,000 teachers, school administrators, state department of education staff, community organizations, and business leaders who are concerned with education issues. The Center/Network partnership has emerged as a highly visible national resource on at-risk and dropout issues. It publishes the refereed *Journal of At-Risk Issues*, a quarterly newsletter, the research-based *Solutions and Strategies* series, and other publications.. It maintains a web page (dropoutprevention.org) and an e-mail listserver (ndpc@clemson.edu) that provide users with needed information and referrals quickly and easily through the Internet. The Center/Network partnership also provides professional development through its annual National Dropout Prevention Conference, annual America's At-Risk Youth National FORUM, and special regional conferences.

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